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The Constant Art of David Tremlett.

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It is a great pleasure to visit the Hamburg Kunsthalle. It is a wonderful gallery with a noble tradition and an outstanding collection, thoughtfully and effectively displayed. It is also a privilege to be able to contribute to the activities of the gallery by speaking about work that is part of one its special exhibitions. My congratulations go to all those involved in organizing the *Drawing Rooms* exhibition and the associated catalogue and events, in particular to Sabrina van der Ley and Henrike Mund, and of course to the artist, David Tremlett *sine qua non*, without whose endeavours we would not be gathered here this evening.

I have entitled this lecture 'the constant art of David Tremlett' with two thoughts in mind: first, that he is an artist who is continuously at work devising and manipulating ideas, images, models and murals. His is a life of constant and prolific art-making. Second, however, I discern a significant continuity across the forty years that run from the period of his emergence out of art school to the present day. More specifically, it is a continuity of interest and of sources of inspiration and methods of working. In this sense his constancy is also aesthetic.

An initial encounter with Tremlett's work from the early 1970s might encourage one to place it alongside contemporary Continental, American and British performance and conceptual art, such as that of Joseph Beuys, John Baldesarri and Keith Arnatt

This is not inappropriate. Viewed from that narrow perspective, however, the generally colorful constructivist wall-pieces of the last twenty years are liable to look quite unconnected to Tremlett's original interests. And even to be the work of an altogether different sensibility directed by very different purposes to very different ends. Yet that appearance would be quite misleading, for respecting the obvious differences in the look and scale of his work the animating principles remain largely the same.

Before saying more about this aspect of Tremlett's constancy, I want to return to the start of his career and situate him within what was a quite revolutionary period in British, Continental and North American art. Let me begin, however, with a few biographical remarks.

David Tremlett was born in 1945 in St Austell, Cornwall. This is in the far south west of England with the rocky coast lying to the east of it and picturesque countryside surrounding the town. It is also about an hour's drive from St Ives which in the decades before and during Tremlett's early life was associated with a string of modernist artists including Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and the émigré Naom Gabo.

Tremlett's parents had taken up farming, his father Rex having previously been a geologist and a writer and broadcaster. Notwithstanding Rex Tremlett's quite conventional and practical outlook on life the home background was evidently untypical. David's grandmother Mrs Florence Tremlett had travelled with tin prospectors to central Africa and wrote a book based on her experiences in Nigeria *With the Tin Gods* (1915). She also authored a string of novels one of which, *A Knight in London*, was made into a silent film in Germany by the director Lupo Pick. Her husband Horace spent some time searching for minerals and their son Rex had in turn been an ore prospector and written about Africa and Solomon's mines in a romantic vein in *The Road to Ophir*, 1956, inspired in part by the adventure tales of the popular writer Rider Haggard.

In 1962 Rex and his wife followed the example of their younger son Peter who had emigrated shortly before to Australia at the young age of 16. David Tremlett chose to remain behind and since his parents were only children this left him in Britain without aunts, uncles or cousins. He was, however, evidently self-contained and purposeful Tremlett in Britain where he had been accepted on a foundation course at Falmouth Art School. A year at Falmouth was followed by three years at Birmingham College of Art from 1963 to 1966 and another three at the Royal College in London between 1966 and 1969. He then began a series of jobs including work as a car mechanic and managed to establish a studio beneath a railway arch in South London. Three years later, in 1972, he changed scene and circumstance, finding work in a horse stable in Hertfordshire where he first rented and then later bought the house *Broadlawns* in which he still lives, though he recently transformed it in line with environmental and aesthetic ideas.

Tremlett's teachers provided no direct influence on his work, though he speaks with appreciation of the independent mindedness of two of his tutors at Falmouth, Ray Exworth and Francis Hewlett, and of the encouragement provided by Peter Atkins at the Royal College. It was Atkins who wrote the exhibition notes for Tremlett's first exhibition. This was at the Grabowski Gallery in 1969 where he exhibited several metal sculptures of quasi-constructivist sorts and a wall piece.

David Tremlett first came to critical attention as part of the New Art movement in the late 1960s, along with his contemporaries Hamish Fulton, Gilbert and George, Richard Long, and a dozen or so other British avant-gardists. Although their work was quite diverse it had certain common features including a repudiation of traditional fine art techniques and materials, and of the abiding focus upon art objects housed within art galleries. Instead, these artists promoted the notion that the idea of a work was the thing that mattered, and that this could be expressed or implemented in a variety of ways, including through texts or performances.

This emphasis upon ideas, together with an apparent demotion of avowedly aesthetic objects fitted in with the emergence in North America of conceptual art, and Tremlett began to be classified with others as a British conceptualist. Though understandable given the preoccupations of the time, in retrospect it can be seen to be a mistake, and I suggest that he is better understood in relation to aspects of modernist abstractionism. By this I have in mind three related movements: first, Russian suprematism and constructivism as developed by Malevich and Tatlin; second the Dutch De Stijl movement founded by Van Doesburg but associated mainly with Mondrian; and third, the rather less radical popular constructivism of Ben Nicholson and other members of the British 'Circle' group of artists, all of which engaged in visual and in some cases literary abstraction.

To understand these various strands of painterly, sculptural and textual abstraction one has to appreciate the general phenomenon of modernism as a response to intellectual, cultural and social trends that converged and strengthened during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and which together comprised the condition of modernity. These include first, the decline of traditional religion, second, the rise of scientific rationalism, and third, the development of all-encompassing nation states.

Since the rise of Christianity in the West it had been common to regard nature as a product of creation revealing something of the mind of God, and to look to events as indicative of providence working out a divine plan for humanity in general and for individuals in particular. At the more mundane level, local cultures and traditions sustained a sense of identity and purpose. With the breakdown of meaning-bestowing narratives, and a loss of the sense of the transcendent in experience and in nature, the world became disenchanting and humanity became demoralized.

In art, one modernist response was to announce and even promote various forms of nihilism. A second reaction was to seek distraction in art-making as a medium of aesthetic

inebriation. A third response, however, was to try to fashion a new kind of art that was knowing about itself and about the general loss of innocence, and was also avowedly modern, but which nonetheless sought a re-enchantment of the world, be it now a world understood to be shaped by human thought and action. In the case of the three movements I have mentioned this was re-animation was pursued through the abstraction out of experience of geometrical forms that were then articulated according to various schemes of arrangement, some visual, some procedural, as in forms of system painting and sculpture.

From the start, in the 1960s, there was an Atlantic divide. American artists such as Michael Heizer, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, and Robert Smithson, extended forms of abstract minimalism beyond the gallery, and in many cases took advantage of the open space to make large ground drawings and sculptures, shifting snow, crops, earth and rock. In Britain a more poetic sensibility prevailed and there was no appetite for monumentality. Artists such as Fulton, Long, and David Tremlett turned away from, or showed no interest in the sculptural styles represented by St Martin's and the Royal College (at one or other, or both of which they all studied). Instead, they experimented in quiet and idiosyncratic ways and were given the opportunity to show their work through a number of collective exhibitions, such as *When Attitudes Become Form* in 1968, *The British Avant Garde* in 1971, the annual series of "Prospect" exhibitions held in Dusseldorf from the same year, and "Documenta 5" at Kassel and *The New Art* in London both in 1972. (The last of these was the first occasion that I saw their work, and having recently left school en route to a traditional fine art course the experience was transformative and challenging). In addition, and then unusually for people in their early twenties, they also had solo shows in Europe and in America. Principal among the providers of this privilege was the late Konrad Fischer in Düsseldorf who first showed Long, in 1968, Fulton in 1969, and Tremlett in 1972, exhibitions that helped secure interest from the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

I mentioned the antipathy of these artists to the sculptural styles then fashionable in the leading London art schools. These styles were typified by the abstract metal sculptures of Anthony Caro and William Tucker (both of whom taught at St Martin's). Caro, later Sir Anthony, was then deploying metal forms in direct reference to industrial means of manufacture: bringing steel rods and plates together and welding them in a conscious departure from the evident high craftsmanship of the academic figurative sculpture of the nineteenth century. In place of the consummate artist carving and polishing alabaster or shaping clay figures for casting in bronze, Caro presented the artist as mechanic. Even so the aesthetic concerns were compositional, and even rather traditional in the sense of

articulating form through shapes, interacting with the surrounding space and responding to the changing light.

Another strand in the sculpture of the time that again deployed commercial manufacturing techniques, this time moulding plastic and fibre-glass or laminating wood to form curved three dimensional, was inspired less by the hard industrial end of contemporary manufacturing culture than by its shiny commercial expression. A prominent representative of the period was Phillip King who had been an assistant to Henry Moore and was then teaching at St Martins School of Art, though his influence was also felt at the Royal College while Tremlett studied there.

While there is an element of playful quasi-representation in these works, they are intended to be taken on their own account. To enjoy or appreciate them you do not have to refer them to anything else. They are forms claiming space alongside the observer, to be viewed and contemplated as other inhabitants of the world, be it alien ones, with the promise, or the threat that human space could be populated by sculptures standing in their own right, neither depicting nor even referring back symbolically to aspects of the human condition.

These elements of abstract, self-contained, manufactured objects constituted an aesthetic against which Tremlett and his contemporaries rebelled. Their alternative was to gather and arrange ready-to-hand materials putting them in the service of broader human interests, including cultural, moral and political ones. This combination of assemblage and associated performance was related to the activities of the Fluxus group in Germany and to the Arte Povera movement in Italy. It was distinguished from them, however, by a less politically challenging and more lyrical sensibility; more solitary, less urban, and with an outdoor and journeying disposition.

Asked about what he read at the time Tremlett listed the poets Shelley, Byron, Dylan Thomas, and TS. Eliot, and the beat writers Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. He added "As for art, the Italian Renaissance, the pioneering [work] of the Constructivists, and of course the art that was occurring at that time, these were all influential". *David Tremlett* (Milan: Leonardo Arte, 1993). Tremlett's wall drawings from that time to the present, like the work of Tatlin, Modrian and Nicholson, have strong architectural references, and he has himself confirmed the impression of a constructivist influence throughout his career. In a more recent interview (with the writer) he says:

I always found that period totally inspiring. As a story it's a classic, the artists involvement in the new world which was to be created (through the Russian Revolution); their input, new experimental ideas; the artistic contribution to design, architecture, music and so on. Ironically, though, in the end the whole thing found itself exported to the Western world and Russia received none. I found the spirit of Constructivism personally inspirational; it was the driving force for Dada and ultimately Fluxus, Concept Art and a great deal of what we see now. As far as concerns the politics of the period, as a student I was very affected by the history of the revolution and read some of the writing of the time, with Rosa Luxemburg my most read author.

In the early days he was taken with the work of Tatlin and Rodchenko in part for the appeal of compositions that were at once related to functional designs while yet being non-utilitarian constructions; in part for the use of lettering and text; and in part for the fact that it emerged out of a changed social context in which political ideas were being related to artistic culture. The last of these considerations had a special resonance in the London of the late 1960s the period of the emergence of environmentalism and feminism, of sexual liberty, of anti-consumerist critique, often mixed in contrasting blends of individualism and communitarianism.

Before returning to his interest in visual geometry and design, more needs to be said about the work Tremlett embarked upon around 1970, and which led in that period to his being associated with Fulton and Long in the 'British Land Art' movement. Like these others, Tremlett was working from the experience of travelling through landscape. At MOMA in New York in 1972 he showed four pieces each part-documentation, part evocation of place and time. Two of these works *The Spring Recordings* and *The Cards* were acquired by the Tate Gallery. The first consists of 81 cassette recordings of sounds (mostly wind and bird song) from each of the then counties of Britain. The second is a companion piece consisting of 81 simple postcard size drawings again one per county. By 1970 Tremlett had moved to the late Nigel Greenwood's Gallery and five years later Greenwood published *Some Places to Visit*, Tremlett's first book work. This is a genre to which, again like Fulton and Long, he has been a frequent contributor and I will return to this aspect of his work towards the end. *Some Places* consists of a series of 26 very elementary line drawings accompanied by captions indicating the mostly curiously-named locations from 'Near Berry Pomeroy' to 'Near Dittisham' via the likes of 'Near Abbotskerswell' and 'Near Seawardstein Wood'.

The subject matter and minimalist text again suggests a link with the English ruralism represented by much of Fulton's and Long's work of the same period. However evidence of difference was already present. For one thing, Tremlett was using quasi-figurative drawing as a form of notation and record; for another, his travels were becoming less formally ordered. Also, and perhaps most importantly for what was to follow, he had begun making large geometrical wall drawings. In the year prior to *Some Places* (1975) he showed a work entitled *Three Curves - Massaged Graphite on Wall* at the Greenwood Gallery. In this, a trio of broken arcs made up of rectangles of graphite massaged into the surface of the wall radiate upwards from the skirting board. In its compositional concern and method of production it is an important statement of what were soon to become Tremlett's preoccupations.

It was some while, however, before he settled into a visually unified style. Throughout the 70s he explored various forms of notation, transposing elements recorded in notebooks while travelling so as to produce gallery pieces and bookworks. The images in these have something of the appearance and function of pictograms. They are minimalist and often angular and awkward, as if formed under stress or in the effort to overcome the resistance of the materials. Unlike the Lascaux cave-dwellers or the pictographicists of New Mexico, however, Tremlett was working with pliable media and had been the recipient of an art education. The seemingly provisional and uncertain character of the images is more aptly attributed to an intention to devise a form of imagery akin to a state of consciousness in which half-remembered scenes and incidents come to mind. Tremlett's art is neither representational nor expressionist; it is evocative and (increasingly) formalist.

Further mention needs to be made of the role of travel in his work. In 1971 he produced an exhibition card bearing the title 'The Art of Searching', and the following year he embarked on an overland trip to Australia. This was partly financed by Robert Self of the Situation Gallery in London in support of a work to be composed of postcards sent back to England from various points along the way. The cards were sent and the work was subsequently exhibited. This was, however, a by-product of a journey made to see his parents and brother for the first time since their departure a decade before.

The emotional complexity of that journey is easy to imagine; and for all its coolness, emotion and sentiment are significant sources of Tremlett's work - be it that they are recollected in tranquillity. It is not uncommon to feel intimations of significance, and that sense is heightened during solitary travel in unfamiliar and culturally different places. Removed from

the routine, one begins to think and feel on a scale that is at once larger yet more intimate; transcendent in scope yet anchored in the interior world of the heart and the soul.

Throughout the 70s and beyond, Tremlett travelled in remote parts of Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australasia, and Europe, staying in cheap hotels: a room his centre of operation, public transport his means of exploration. He walked and talked, watched and waited until something(s) registered - an episode, a place, an experience. Received into consciousness this mingled with pre-existing materials and the resulting work later emerged as an image or text. By stages he found himself attracted to derelict buildings and, from about 1980, moved to draw gently on their interior walls; a sympathetic acknowledgement of their abandonment by a solitary passing stranger. His medium was traditional artists pastels in the colours of basic building materials and of sun and sky; and as well as leaving behind a token of solidarity he retained notebook sketches of floor plans which would later reappear as elements within gallery wall-drawings again made in pastel.

The massaging of powdery pigment into a wall has a primordial quality as has the solitary 'dream-time' journeying that inspires it. Besides, the possibility of working without tools and travelling light well-suited Tremlett's practice as an artist. Openness was all, and an economy of method and form seemed apt to the values of simplicity, fragility and understatement. Confirmation of a verbally poetic sensibility is provided by series of word-drawings originating in this period, in which letters from the names of places visited are highlighted or isolated. Thus AIR is extracted from Zaire, BAN from Lebanon, CUT from Calcutta, EGO from Oregon and so on.

In the last two decades Tremlett's architectural and constructivist interests have developed and become more prominent. Allied to the medium of wall-drawing this combination suggests a parallel with the work of Sol LeWitt - more marked as LeWitt himself became interested of planes of textured colour. The association was more than stylistic, for the two artists collaborated on the redecoration of a small, formerly derelict, chapel in a vineyard on the outskirts of Barolo in the Piemonte region of Italy. Lewitt produced the highly coloured exterior scheme while Tremlett made interior wall and ceiling drawings and designed a marble floor and stained-glass windows, as well as priest's vestments.

Tremlett's part in this joint project was but one of an increasing number of commissions for interiors in private homes and public buildings. By way of illustration, in 1996 and 97 he collaborated with the architect Tadao Ando on two bedrooms in a guest house on Benesse Island in Japan. In 1997 he also completed a central hallway in the London residence of the

Duke and Duchess of Westminster with the ceiling worked in pastel, and the floor composed in a variety of inlaid woods. The following years he made drawings in a series of rooms in the Castle of the Marquis of Barolo again in Italy, and produced a scheme for the entrance lobby of the Landeszentral Bank in Dresden (1988) and another for the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Brugge. There have also been many commissions for churches including a set of 25 windows for the Church of St Peter and St Paul in Villenauxe-la-Grand, France.

The tradition of commissioning artists to work interiors is as old as the methods of applying designs to walls and ceilings. It might have been supposed, however, that the practice has become restricted to traditional forms and subject matter. The examples of LeWitt's wall paintings, Fulton's stencilled texts, Long's mud drawings and Tremlett's massaged interiors indicates the adaptability of the tradition. Of these four, however, I would say that Tremlett is alone in giving primacy to wall-drawing as a mode of art making, and in the developed architectural sensibility he brings to it.

I would also say that his colour sensibility is more continental than British, owing something perhaps to the early influence of Russian, Dutch and German constructivists. In speaking of 'constructivism' there is a risk of confusing a general interest in abstracted geometric form with a particular historical movement: the mechanistic scientism of the Russian avant-garde. Tremlett's constructivism, by contrast is broader and gentler, more humanistic and lyrical and on balance, closer to the progressive abstractionism of the European and English modernists for whom the use of abstract forms was a way of engaging the universal aspects of human sensibility. Likewise, although Tremlett's practice can seem idiosyncratic he has also reached for forms that transcend localities and cultures. His transposition of shapes and colours from one part of the world to another is an aspect of that universalism: not denying difference but de-localising it: carrying forms hither and thither on behalf of aesthetic internationalism.

There is, too, the visual and conceptual economy of the modernists: paring a composition down to a number of basic elements drawn from two, or at most three categories and mixing image and text. In some works, for example, documents of travel - hotel receipts, bus tickets, postcard images - are collaged against plain backgrounds and then set between blocks of pastel-rubbed circles, the latter looking like particles seen through an out-of-focus microscope. The bunching and lack of definition of these forms also creates an illusion of jostling movement. In other recent works texts are disassembled into their constituent letters which are then stencilled to produce a dancing crowd of shapes.

Perhaps the most significant development in recent years, though, has been the trend to larger projects, such as the current exhibition, involving complete environments where the viewer's entire visual field is filled. This is representative of Tremlett's work of the last decade which shows increasing confidence and an enlarged repertoire of ideas and images. Monumental pieces turn walls, ceilings and floors into rhythmic sequences of contrasting shapes and colours. In some cases the effect is to suggest a self-performing musical score; in others it subverts the physical uniformity of the walls and other planes and defies any attempt to read the forms in terms of figure and ground. In yet others, soft-smudged pastel outlines shimmer against white panels as if seen through a haze of Mediterranean heat.

Finally, I want to return to the genre of book works some of which are on display in vitrines in the Hamburger Kunsthalle exhibition. There have been over thirty such since *Some Places to Visit*. Most of these have been in open editions (probably up to 2,000 copies); while others have been in editions as few as ten, each carrying some unique element.

The term 'artist's book' first acquired its current use in connection with artists working in the late 1960s who were looking for new ways of exploring ideas, often related to processes or performances. Such a book might be a unique object or have multiple copies, but in either event it was intended as an artwork. In this respect 'artist's books' differ in conception not only from studies and catalogues, but also from fine editions of literary texts that include autographic illustrations.

Originating mainly in the US, one of the earliest exhibitions of artists's books was the group show *January 5-31, 1969*, featuring works by Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth and Sol Lewitt, among others. Whereas these American practitioners tended to the conceptual and urban, their British contemporaries were more lyrical and rural. Three early examples illustrate the point: Richard Long's *Two Sheepdogs Cross in and out of the Passing Shadows*, *The Clouds drift over the Hill with the Passing Storm* (1971), Hamish Fulton's *Hollow Lane* (1972), and David Tremlett's previously mentioned *Some Places to Visit* (1975).

These three artists remain the principal British exponents of the wall drawing as well as of the artist's book; and as regards the former medium Tremlett is the most inventive of the trio in responding to the particularities of place and space. His wall-works, whether in domestic, commercial, palatial or ecclesial settings are striking architectural engagements (and he is much sought after from all quarters for private and public commissions in each of these categories).

Looking across the decades and across the range of Tremlett's book works there are significant differences: from small, irregular, almost notational sketchings to fully-developed drawings, often incorporating text in visual rather than narrative mode. Yet the continuities are greater than the differences. Tremlett finds, and reinvests power in abstracted architectural forms, more often in plans than in elevations – as if what engages his imagination is the ground upon which one might wander or ritually process, rather than the façade upon which one might gaze in formal aesthetic contemplation.

To that extent his sensibility is sculptural and even choreographical. He is alive to space and to movement within it, and that awareness reappears in the pages of his artist's books. The images in early works often recorded or suggested travel, or presented ground plans as if they were drafts for stencils ready to be applied to walls. There are also assembled papers and notes, suspended somewhere between relics and reminders.

By stages, however, the architectural element becomes more prominent and more expert. And along with that so the execution becomes more precise with the drawings – on page or wall – appearing less like builders sketches and notes, and more like precisely conceived and consummately executed designs.

Although there are obvious contrasts of scale, intimacy and impact between on the one hand, images drawn for the pages of a small book and on the other those conceived for walls, ceilings and often entire sets of rooms, implemented over days with the aid of assistants, there is a common measure and a regular method of projection between bookwork and wall-drawing. It is quite simply that the former is like an architect's notebook, working out ideas within the boundaries of one kind of frame (the page) in memory or in a anticipation of the boundaries of a three-dimensional space.

In overall summary, David Tremlett combines in a unique way traditional artistic interests in colour and form with a highly experimental avant-gardist disposition; at once poetically inspired, craftsmanlike and innovative; never inclined to think he has arrived at a perfect method and ever open to the demand to fit form to idea and to location, and he is forever constant in drawing rooms.